

TESTIMONY

On

HB 4083

ROADSIDE MEMORIAL SIGNS FOR DECEASED OREGON PRISONERS OF  
WAR AND UNACCOUNTED FOR (MIA) VETERANS

To

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

By

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February 6, 2020

I am Dick Tobiason, LTC US Army Retired, Chairman, Bend Heroes Foundation and requestor of this legislation. Bend Heroes Foundation mailing address is 1900 NE 3<sup>rd</sup> St., Suite 106 #205, Bend, Oregon, 97701.

I thank the Committee for this opportunity today to testify in support of HB 4083.

I have a personal interest in POWs and MIAs as I helped repatriate 27 Americans who were POWs in South Vietnam during “Operation Homecoming”, February 12, 1973 – 47 years ago next week. My Army Aviation unit lost 21 crew members in Vietnam with 9 becoming Missing in Action – MIA or “Unaccounted For”. Three of the 6 were recovered and 2 were laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. Six still remain MIA in North Vietnam and near the DMZ. I know siblings of 2 Oregon vets who still remain MIA in Vietnam and a son of a Vietnam MIA whose remains were recovered in Laos.

The Bend Heroes Memorial created by our Foundation displays the names of 113 veterans from Bend who lost their lives during wars from WWI to Iraq and Afghanistan, 17 are still MIA – 16 WWII, 1 Vietnam. The remains of 2 former MIAs were returned – 1 WWII, 1 Korea. The names of the MIAs and Accounted For are marked with + and <> symbols as is the practice at the Vietnam Memorial in our nation’s capital.

In 2008, I started a 12 year veterans’ highways signs project with this committee and its predecessor honoring almost one half million Oregon vets who served in 5 major wars beginning with WWI, 5,965 who lost their lives, 15,000 wounded, 800 POWs and 1,000 MIAs and 30 Medal of Honor recipients. Those 8 highways are spelled out in HB 4083 and made possible by the Legislature, 3 Governors, ODOT and many donors.

#### MAP OF 8 VETERANS HIGHWAYS

I thank Rep. Lewis, Rep. Helt and Rep. Zika for sponsoring HB 3452 in the last session and Rep. Lewis for arranging the Sept. 16, 2019 ceremonial signing of HB 3452 – POW/MIA memorial Highway by Gov. Kate Brown.

#### PHOTO GOV. BROWN SIGNING HB 3452

We have installed 79 signs – soon to be 91 on 8 border to border highways totaling almost 3,000 miles – a sign every 65 miles on average. We have enjoyed a very fine relationship with ODOT.

Four highways are a first in America: Purple Heart Trail on Interstate 5 between our borders with Canada and Mexico, Persian Gulf/Afghanistan and Iraq Veterans Memorial Highway on US Hwy 101, Oregon Medal of Honor Highway on US Hwy 20 and now the POW/MIA Memorial Highway on US Hwy 26.

We have also honored Oregon’s 30 Medal of Honor recipients with plaques in 13 Medal of Honor Cities – HCR 1.

We are almost finished raising \$24,000 to pay ODOT to install 12 POW/MIA Memorial Highway signs along US Highway 26 across Oregon beginning in May. At our request, Idaho plans to designate its US Highway 26 as its POW/Memorial Highway this year. The National League of POW/MIA Families is interested in extending it further east to the Atlantic Ocean.

All together by the end of this year we will have raised about \$115,000 in cash or in kind donations to pay ODOT and others to fabricate and install 91 signs.

Now the big one – as envisioned in HB 2100 – Oregon Medal of Honor Highway, we are extending it through 11 more states east of Oregon across the nation on US Highway 20, the longest highway in the USA – from sea to shining sea. We are 55% completed with another 17% in process. All states are following the Oregon model. ODOT has done a fine job sharing our cherished highway sign design with the other states.

### MAP OF NATIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR HIGHWAY ACROSS AMERICA

So take a bow for supporting our requests for honoring veterans with honorific highway signs over the last decade.

The late Mr. Robert D. Maxwell, the last living Oregon Medal of Honor recipient was my Vice Chairman of the WWII Veterans Historic Highway on US Highway 97 and the Oregon Medal of Honor across Oregon on US Highway 20. He and I testified on legislation and met with Governor Kulongoski and Governor Brown for ceremonial bill signings – both in Bend. Mr. Maxwell also helped dedicate those signs.

Mr. Maxwell passed away on May 11, 2019 after the Idaho Medal of Honor Highway was designated by the Idaho Legislature – Mr. Maxwell was born in Boise, Idaho. I helped the Oregon Governor, Legislators and veterans dedicate the first sign in Idaho. Mr. Maxwell knew we would continue the Medal of Honor Highway across America. Beginning on the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of his passing, Nebraska’s American Legion will walk his Medal of Honor flag across the 432 mile Nebraska Medal of Honor Highway.

Back to HB 4083: As intended, HB 4083 complements the POW/MIA Memorial Highway and existing Roadside memorial sign - Fallen Hero Memorial Highway sign program which are defined in HB 4083.

### Photos of FHMH signs I helped implement:

According to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), the remains of 42 or only 4% of the 1,000 Oregon MIAs have been “Accounted For” over the last 36 years: 18 WWII, 5 Korean War, 18 Vietnam and 1 Cold War. Of the 18 WWII “Accounted For” 11 were returned over the last 10 years or about 70 years since they became MIA – “Unaccounted For”.

Attached are the names of 7 Oregon MIAs “Accounted For” during the last 21/2 years: WWII/4, Korea/1, Laos/1. One of the WWII “Accounted For” is Lyle Charpilloz from Rep. Lewis’ District. Pfc Charpilloz was laid to rest in South Salem - 3 miles from the Capitol. His family would be eligible to request ODOT to install a roadside memorial sign if HB 4083 becomes law. There are still 998 (including 21 WWI not counted by DPAA) MIAs from Oregon. All MIAs were declared dead by the Federal Government.

Based on DPAA’s national statistics, it is likely that nearly half of Oregon 885 WWII MIAs will not be recovered as they were either lost – unknown number or buried at sea (82). The 885 MIAs represent about one - fourth of Oregon’s 3,838 WWII war dead.

Turning to POWs. According to the National Archives Records Administration, 770 Oregonians became POW during WWII with 598 returned to friendly forces thus becoming Ex POWs. One hundred seventy

two (172) of the 770 died in captivity either by execution (76), disease and/or malnutrition. Many of them were laid to rest overseas in cemeteries managed by the American Battle Monuments Commission. ABMC memorializes MIAs on Tablets and Courts of the Missing and DPAA includes them in its "Unaccounted For" lists. Of the 56 Korean War MIAs, 7 died as POW. Of the 34 Vietnam MIAs, 1 died as POW. ABMC lists 21 Oregonians as MIA from WWI. DPAA is not searching for WWI MIAs but does assist others such as the Doughboy organization who still search. I doubt any remains of WWI MIAs will be returned to Oregon.

According to the Oregon Coast Military Museum in Florence 79 Oregon Merchant Marines died during WWII including 1 from Bend with 6 more becoming POW and 1 still MIA. NARA does not include the names of the 9 Merchant Marine POWs. ABMC lists the names of 6 Oregon Merchant Marines buried in its cemeteries but does not include the 1 MIA. DPAA does not list the 1 MIA either perhaps because Merchant Marines were not defined as veterans during WWII.

Although NARA records show 7 Oregon civilian contractors were executed by the Japanese at Wake Island or on Hell Ships, none became POW or MIA.

What HB 4083 does is to require ODOT to install FHMH signs when those honors are requested and funded by families of fallen POWs and MIAs whose remains have been "Accounted For" and without having to request HCRs as now required for all other fallen veterans. The low rate of returns of MIA and POW remains suggests very few Fallen Hero Memorial Highway signs would be requested by families or other parties.

I understand ODOT has installed about 50 FHMH signs with about 10 for Vietnam Veterans and 40 for OIF/OEF veterans. I know of no WWII and Korean War FHMH signs. I suggest ODOT provide a list of installed signs by name, war and location.

I recommend "**individual killed in the line of duty**" on page 2, line 24 be revised to "**who died in the line of duty**" so as to include POWs who died due to disease and malnutrition. In that same sentence, "**or any other accredited organization**" should be added after "...**Accounting Agency**" so any WWI MIA recovered remains will be included.

HB 4083 would amend ORS 366.931 - Roadside memorial signs. That section refers to the "Armed Forces of the United States" as defined in ORS 348.282. I believe ORS 348.282 (repealed) did not include Merchant Marines who were given Veterans status belatedly in 1988 but only for WWII. The appropriate law should include WWII Merchant Marine as a member of the Armed Forces.

In closing, I urge this committee to vote unanimously in favor of HB 4083. The final law should be publicized widely so qualified POW/MIA Families across Oregon will know about another opportunity for closure created by the Legislature and Governor.

It has been a high honor and privilege for me to work with the Legislature honoring veterans over the last decade.

I would be pleased to respond to your questions.

Thank you.